Literature as Evidence

Few general readers now pick up the American book that prompted Sydney Smith to ask “Who reads an American book?” In truth, few general readers ever did. Adam Seybert’s *Statistical Annals*—an eight-hundred-page, six-pound volume, printed in the dimensions of a modern metropolitan phone directory, with 175 numeric tables describing population, commerce, and debt—aimed at nothing less than a full representation of the United States in book form, but the massive book was not for the masses. Without governmental intervention it may have had no readers at all. Seybert’s colleagues in Congress believed the book would be “necessary and acceptable to every functionary of the Government of the United States” but that it could never be “popular,” and in April 1818 they passed an act to subscribe for five hundred copies. The public had bought a work of American literature.

Hoping to find a market for Seybert’s book beyond the politicians and institutions of higher learning to which Congress distributed *Statistical Annals*, Philadelphia printers Thomas Dobson and Sons ran off at least a thousand more copies at their own risk. Brave booksellers in Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia advertised the book in late 1818, and favorable reviews in U.S. newspapers appeared the next year; nonetheless, supply radically surpassed demand. Would the government step in again? In 1821 the printers begged the Senate to purchase eight hundred additional unsold copies “at a reduced price.” They met with defeat but may have sold some of

these toxic assets to the author himself. Thirteen years later, Seybert's sister Elizabeth Rapp petitioned the House to purchase three hundred copies that remained in the family at the time of her brother's death in France in 1825, but she had no more luck unloading Seybert's American book than the printers had.

A child of the Enlightenment, Seybert presented his few readers with "facts and data," not "mere opinions" or theoretical "speculations," information that would form the basis of future policy debates (as it did) but was not itself subject to debate. His book serves as a prime example of what historian Patricia Cline Cohen has called the "quantitative mentality" of the early United States; it also represents one stage in the evolution of what literary scholar Mary Poovey has described as "the modern fact," those pieces of numeric evidence whose status before or beyond interpretation made them useful building blocks in economics and the social sciences. The demographic and commercial "facts" presented by Seybert that captured the most attention from his U.S. contemporaries—his ratios of free to unfree persons charting the growth of slavery from 1790 to 1810 and his tables showing the imbalance of trade with other nations—were the same ones that led Sydney Smith to focus the concluding remarks of his January 1820 review on the failure of the United States to export important cultural products and on the questionable claim of white Americans to be "the greatest, the most refined, the most enlightened, and the most moral people on earth." After all, Smith asked, "Who reads an American book?" And how moral could the white population really be in a country that could count—thanks to Seybert's American book—"every sixth man a Slave, whom his fellow-creatures may buy and sell and torture?"

The nine historians featured here treat literature as evidence, but they do not see the books they recommend as repositories of neutral "facts." Carolyn Eastman considers the readers of a frequently reprinted "true account" of Caribbean pirates. Vincent Brown discovers a new perspective on contemporary immigration debates in a policy pamphlet about Jamaican slavery. Caroline Winterer sees an intellectual path not taken in a scientific essay on the origins of racial difference. Joyce Chaplin returns to a natural history of the American South and to a pre-Darwinian moment in the relation of science with religion. Sarah Knott finds, in the pages of a forgotten novel, a generational change in the history of the emotions. John Wood Sweet sees challenges to early national politics and to our own understanding of the meanings of freedom in a rare eyewitness account of the Atlantic slave trade produced in Connecticut by a native of Africa. François Furstenbergdescribes a famous biography as a national glue between readers in distant regions. James Sidbury recovers a bound manuscript pamphlet written by a resident of Sierra Leone, a man who had returned to the region of his birth after slavery in South Carolina and service with the British during the American Revolution. And Matthew Mason recommends a first-person account of one man's life under slavery in the antebellum United States, a crucial document for historians who hope to write the history of the domestic slave trade.

The works selected are wide-ranging examples of the rich literature of early America, but because what counts as literature has changed so fundamentally since the time of Seybert and Smith, some of the selections may strike readers as decidedly nonliterary. Presses in Colonial British America and the early United States issued nearly one hundred thousand non-periodical imprints before 1820. In this vast sea of books, pamphlets, and broadsides, the small islands of writing most modern general readers call literature are statistical outliers. Novels, poems, and plays, for instance, represent only about 3.5 percent of the total items printed between 1640 and 1819; and since American presses issued works by European authors, the percentage of texts most modern readers would describe as "American" is significantly smaller. Asked to write short "blurbs" about American books they teach and study, the historians here go beyond the questions of who wrote or who read American books, of whether certain books meet our contemporary and narrow definition of literature, to suggest what effects these books had in the past and why such books should be read—and reread—today.

Alexandre Exquemelin, *Bucaniers of America: Or, a True Account of the Most Remarkable Assaults Committed of Late Years Upon the Coasts of the West-Indies, by the Bucaniers of Jamaica and Tortuga, Both English and French* (1678). Reprint, London: William Crooke, 1684.

Even though *Bucaniers of America* wasn't published in America until the nineteenth century, it circulated around the Atlantic like its subjects, its author, and the images that portrayed the book's action. Alexandre Exquemelin had been a buccaneer himself before he temporarily retired and turned author in Amsterdam in 1678, so he wrote with authority about vivid characters like Bartholomew the Portuguese, Rock the Brazilian, and the exceptionally brutal Francois Lolonois—men who disrupted both Caribbean trade and orderly state and empire building. Translated into German, Spanish, French, and English editions in increasingly larger print runs, the book appeared in early American libraries within twenty years of its original publication.

Exquemelin's book figured America as a site of action and adventure—and the printers who kept new editions on the market made sure to underscore this aspect of the book's appeal. In what was at least the fifteenth edition (1704), a London printer explained in a preface, "Indeed, the wondrous actions, and daring adventures therein related, are such as could not but transport the most stupid minds into an Admiration of them," he stated frankly. Pirates surely failed to exhibit "Justness and Regularity" of Christian men, he acknowledged, or even the "tolerable morals" of ordinary men. Yet they inspired the "greatest Astonishment imaginable." The printer touted the book as fodder for the imagination, a means of transporting oneself to a world of wonders. To enhance the imaginative work of such texts, printers added numerous evocative cuts displaying dynamic scenes of torture, sea battles, and swordplay. These were far from the static illustrations of harbor scenes or portraits of other

contemporary books: *Bucaniers of America* told tales of action in both text and image.

By the 1720s *Bucaniers of America* was one of several titles available on pirates; enterprising printers even took to compiling omnibus editions that combined Exquemelin's account with those of Charles Johnson, Woodes Rogers, and other writers. Each new volume contained illustrations and tales that built on Exquemelin's original themes and codified the textual and visual repertoire of pirate themes. As a result, stories about pirates appeared in dozens of editions throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, guaranteeing that pirates would be known for the "wondrous actions" and "daring adventures" that took place in the Americas—adventures to be enjoyed vicariously by readers everywhere.

Carolyn Eastman

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Anonymous, *An Essay Concerning Slavery and the Danger Jamaica is expos'd to from the Too great Number of Slaves, and the too little Care that is taken to manage Them, and a Proposal to prevent the further Importation of Negroes into that Island*. London: Charles Corbett, at Addison's-Head, over-against St. Dunstan's Church in Fleet-Street, 1746.

Teachers of history face a contradictory challenge: we seek to encourage our students to recognize how different the past was from the present, while, at the same time, prodding them to see how issues in the past resonate with current concerns. If we are successful, the very strangeness of the past throws similarities of predicament or process into sharper relief. One of my favorite early American texts, published in 1746, does this beautifully. It warns of the dangers of unchecked immigration to America and urges a labor policy that would favor assimilated residents over new migrants; this much is familiar. But the treatise is discussing a slave society burgeoning with the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade.

An Essay Concerning Slavery is a pamphlet, written in response to a rebellious conspiracy in St. John's Parish, Jamaica, discovered in 1744 and allegedly organized by a dozen slave drivers, themselves enslaved, on different plantations. The anonymous author worries about the racial composition of the colony, as we would expect: "By the Poll-Tax in 1740," he notes, "it appeared that the Negroes were ten times more in Number than the white Persons." More surprisingly, he offers the natural rights argument against slavery, even while recognizing emancipation as impractical for an empire grown rich off the labor of the enslaved. Yet both his abolitionist sentiments and his racial fears are

subordinate to a more general concern about the number of alienated, oppressed workers with no stake in maintaining the existing order. His proposal to save the colony from being "over-run, and ruined by its own Slaves" features a racially flexible social reform: ensuring a due proportion of free people "of one Colour or another, white, black or yellow, since white Men enough cannot immediately be got," preventing slaves from entering trades or being employed in domestic service, and limiting them to "the Field or such kind of Drudgery as cannot be carried on but by them." Drivers, especially, should be free men.

Responding to the labor migration that had made Jamaica the most profitable colony in British America, the author of the *Essay* urges a reconsideration of the society's terms of inclusion and hierarchy. Students see in this text how an antislavery sentiment they undoubtedly share emerges from an anti-black racism they commonly condemn; they see how a concern to perpetuate a brutal system may lead to the advocacy of a more plural social elite; they see an eerily familiar anti-immigration argument emerging from the peculiar circumstances of a place in the past. Hopefully, they also see how history unfolds in discernible but unpredictable patterns.

Vincent Brown

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Samuel Stanhope Smith, *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species.* Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, 1787.

Among the most memorable phrases in an age that gave us so many is Samuel Stanhope Smith's "universal freckle." He didn't coin it, but he used it to great effect in his landmark *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1787). What made people around the globe look so different? For Smith it was environment, not a separate creation. The differences between whites and blacks were not in kind but degree; dark skin was just a lot of freckles that had spread together, like cookies in the oven. Freckles would come and freckles would go, but the theological truth of a single human family was eternal.

Smith was a minister and a philosopher in an age when it was fine to be both, happily knitting science to Christian revelation. His *Essay* was recognized for what it was: among the most important examinations of race produced in Enlightenment America. It was cheered across the Atlantic by Scottish philosophers such as Dugald Stewart and by the French naturalist Georges Cuvier. It was soon reprinted in Edinburgh (1788) and London (1789), a sign of its appeal in transatlantic debates about race and science.

Today we all remember the more pessimistic racial ideas Thomas Jefferson

expressed in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (also published in the 1780s). Jefferson thought that the physical and mental differences he observed between blacks and whites might be unchanging, views that looked ahead to the kind of hereditary racism that became increasingly popular before the Civil War. But it was Smith who best captured the more optimistic outlook of his own age, when it seemed that the human family might all share parts of a universal freckle.

Caroline Winterer

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William Bartram, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws; Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of Those Regions, together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians. Embellished with Copper-Plates.* Philadelphia: James and Johnson, 1791.

William Bartram was America's most influential naturalist. He was also its most unflappable. According to him, every near-death experience out in early America's wild green yonder was yet another uplifting example of cosmic beneficence. Only consider how Bartram, discovering that a wolf had sneaked away provisions stored near his sleeping self, commended the creature's mercy for stealing his food rather than ripping his throat out.

This year, when it's all Darwin all the time, Bartram's view of nature is especially interesting as the *before* picture: red in tooth and claw yet, somehow, providentially good. Bartram extols nature as divine Creation and savors the American frontier as a sensory riot in which he thwacks alligators, dines on raccoon pilaf, and snuffs the sweet-scented plant he uproots while tumbling down a hill. His readers ate it up and ripped it off—notably Coleridge in "Kubla Khan" (1816), where American wilderness becomes: Xanadu!

Even Darwin cited Bartram but glimpsed unprovidential trends within nature's relentless hunger. Did Darwin deprive science of religion? It may be truer that he deprived it of literature. Darwin theorized brilliantly about death; Bartram wrote brilliantly, even on death: "the bee quite exhausted by his struggles, and the repeated wounds of the butcher, became motionless, and quickly expired in the arms of the devouring spider, who, ascending the rope with his game, retired to feast on it under cover of the leaves; and perhaps before night, became himself the delicious evening repast of a bird or lizard." Available in paperback.

Joyce Chaplin

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Samuel Relf, *Infidelity; or The Victims of Sentiment. A novel, in a series of letters*. Philadelphia: W.W. Woodward, 1797.

Samuel Relf's *Infidelity; or The Victims of Sentiment* has been forgotten by posterity, forgotten even by those feminist critics who recuperated the sentimental novel, a victim at once of sentiment's embarrassing quality outside its immediate moment and of our political concerns. Why read the tears penned by a twenty-one-year-old gent of dubious talent? Why linger over a tale of rebellious young love and married women, an indulgent nod to Goethe's *Sorrows and Sympathetic Attachments of Werther*, complete even with a Cavern of Meditation where—unironic, this—the stones make sympathetic echoes and the stream flows fuller in the company of human anguish? *Infidelity* was, arguably, the first free-standing Philadelphian novel, graciously dedicated to the fifteen-year-old daughter of Anne Bingham, the city's Federalist salonniere. The novel's interest—cued not least by that dedication—resides in the generational relations it exposes and the story it reflects about the shifting historical fate of sensibility, the era's striking commitment to the self's sensitivity. Relf's insight is the cultural disjuncture between an older generation of sentimentalists—Bingham's generation, who invested the American Revolution with sentimental hopes to create a new and more sensitive society—and a rising youth. Heirs to the revolution and its social utopianism, this younger generation turned sentiment inward and onward. Raised in the mainstream of revolutionary sentiment, that is, young ladies and gents were compelled to reinvent sensibility, pressing it to greater solipsism and excess. They focused less on remaking society and more on refining their exquisite selves. Counterposing older and younger friendship circles, Relf's novel captures the generational divide that frayed the Revolution's sentimental hopes and framed sensibility's initial post-revolutionary fate.

Sarah Knott

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Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of*

Africa, But resident above sixty years in the United States of America. Related by Himself. **New London, Conn.: C. Holt, at the Bee-Office, 1798.**

More than twelve million people survived the middle passage from Africa to the Americas, but only about a dozen left behind eyewitness accounts. One of them was Venture Smith.

His brief *Narrative* (1798) offers a sweeping, bottom-up view of the colonial dynamics that brought together—and kept apart—disparate peoples and places in an increasingly global world. Although Smith was illiterate, his narrative voice was distinctive and personal. He challenged several major developments in late-eighteenth-century discourse: the sentimental style that dominated Anglophone antislavery writing, the recurrent claim that people freed from slavery in the North were incapable of virtuous citizenship, and the pervasive emphasis on the "free market" as the basis of American pursuits of happiness.

Smith's memories of his West African childhood are dramatic and detailed. His account of slavery along the shores of Long Island Sound emphasizes ongoing negotiations over violence, labor value, and the limits of civil society. And the story of how he secured his freedom—through an agonizing series of bargains and betrayals—stands as a powerful rebuke to those inclined to view the ideologies of liberty and sentiment as detached from African American agency.

Smith is often hailed as an American hero, a self-made man who triumphed against the constraints and prejudices of his time. Fortunately, his story is much more interesting than that. In it, slavery and freedom are not easy opposites. Alongside pride in his own achievement is an awareness of brutality, injustice, and sadism. And his commitment to commercial values is colored by doubt about the ultimate worth of money, the wounds it can heal, and the happiness it can secure.

John Wood Sweet

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Mason Locke Weems, *The life of George Washington with curious anecdotes, equally honourable to himself and exemplary to his young countrymen. 9th, greatly improved/embelished with seven engravings.* Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1809.

I knew of Mason Locke Weems long before I ever read anything he'd written. Hack historian, bookseller, clergyman, and most of all epistolary genius, Weems is now best known for his account of George Washington and the cherry tree—a story that he almost certainly invented and then popularized in his 1809 *Life of*

George Washington. Written and then revised between 1800 and 1808, the biography was a runaway bestseller: by 1825, it was in its fortieth edition. The book was a product of Weems's many years traveling the country from New York to Georgia selling books and pamphlets and gathering knowledge about his readers' interests. No surprise the book became so popular.

What is more surprising is to discover that the "curious anecdotes" that appealed to readers in the early nineteenth century still captivate readers today, at least if my students' reaction is any gauge. The book is beyond corny, and yet somehow it charms every group to which I've assigned it. Despite themselves, they are drawn into the stories of Washington's childhood and Weems's thrilling account of the American Revolution. Even my Franco-Canadian students are somehow moved.

Students' instinctive suspicions, bred over a lifetime of corporate advertising and patriotic shilling, seem to fade. Many stop reading the book as propaganda or even as homework and begin reading it as entertainment. Where most of my classroom discussions have me trying to knock down students' skepticism, Weems provides a rare opportunity to teach a text from a position that produces naïveté. He allows us to ponder questions of readership—both historical and contemporary—to wonder why Weems and his countrymen were so fascinated with Washington's childhood; and to investigate role of heroes in building a nation. Even his silences—where are Washington's slaves?—speak eloquently about the work of forgetting in the nationalist imaginary.

Abraham Lincoln fondly recalled reading Weems's biography of Washington as a child. As I listen to my students discuss the book enthusiastically, I occasionally let myself imagine that I am hearing a faint echo of what drew readers two hundred years ago to Weems's delightful account.

François Furstenberg

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John Kizell, "Apology for For the Conduct of John Kezell And His associates Occasioned By the Strictures And Denunciations by the Rev. Daniel Coker In His Journall Letters and Informations In the fourth Annual Report," a manuscript pamphlet in the Ebenezer Burgess Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

During the summer of 1821, John Kizell decided to defend his reputation. A native of present-day Sierra Leone, he had been sold into South Carolina as a child but escaped bondage by joining the British during the Revolution. Following the war he settled briefly in Nova Scotia before returning to the

region of his birth as an early settler in Britain's Sierra Leone Colony. He offered his talents as a cultural broker to the first expedition sent out by the American Colonization Society (ACS) to found a black American settler society in Africa. The leaders of the group followed Kizell's advice and settled at Sherbro Island, about one hundred miles south of Freetown, Sierra Leone. The island proved unhealthy, the white leaders of the expedition had difficulty negotiating with native headmen for land rights, and the expedition collapsed in the face of high mortality and uncertain security. Surviving settlers followed Daniel Coker, a black minister from Baltimore, back to the British colony at Sierra Leone. Coker made Kizell a scapegoat for the expedition's failure.

Upon learning that he was taking the blame, Kizell wrote what must be one of the earliest English-language books written by an African American in Africa. He folded large sheets in half and sewed them together. In large and decorative cursive, he inscribed the title on the front, "Apology for For the Conduct of John Kezell And His associates …" Using creative spelling, unsystematic punctuation, and passionate argument, he expressed his anger and sense of betrayal. His text shines new light on the history of Liberia and the ACS, but it shines even brighter light on the cultural power of the book for people who struggled to acquire literacy. In his belief that a self-bound pamphlet would carry greater authority than a mere letter, Kizell provides a glimpse of the battles that many forgotten victims of slavery must have fought to influence debates over their fates. That his manuscript pamphlet sat in the Massachusetts Historical Society waiting to be discovered by a twenty-first century scholar reminds us how high were the barriers keeping them out of those debates.

James Sidbury

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Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, who lived forty years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia as a slave, under various masters, and was one year in the nave with Commodore Barney during the late war.* New York: John S. Taylor, 1837.

One of the very best entries in the large genre of the slave narrative was written by Charles Ball. Published twice in the nineteenth century, under two different titles, Ball's testimony—including a gripping account of not one but two escapes from the Deep South—remains an invaluable first-person account of the domestic slave trade in the early nineteenth century.

This trade victimized Ball in its very early stages, when it was known more as the “Georgia trade” than as the trade to the Deep South, which ultimately wrenched around one million people from their homes in the older slave states. Recent (and burgeoning) scholarship on the slave trade—all of which draws on Ball’s descriptions of the early form and effects of this interstate human trafficking—has placed this coerced Great Migration at the center of the antebellum African American experience, replacing the plantation that stood at the center of earlier scholarship. After all, the trade affected not only the million or so people sold, but also their kinfolk left behind. Moreover, the threat of sale hung with menacing uncertainty over every slave—sold or not—in the United States. Ball’s narrative offers a compelling description of the human drama involved in all of this. It matches better-known slave narratives both in the adventure of his escapes and the power of his testament to slave resistance.

Matthew Mason

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